The “Zebulon Pike”

By W. Patrick Lang

The USNS Zebulon Pike was an auxiliary transport of the US Navy.

The Laine family rode this rusty old bitch of a Liberty ship from Bremerhaven to New York. The passage was 17 days in the steady head winds and rough sea state of the North Atlantic. The ship wallowed and bucked her way through the swells and wind waves like an elephant trying to swim.

The trip to Europe with his mother several years earlier had been on another Liberty ship. That one was named “Zebulon Vance.” As a result young Walter Laine thought for a while that all Liberty ships were named “Zebulon---------.” On that voyage he and his very sea sick mother had been berthed with several other officers’ families. These women had not seen their husbands for a long time, in some cases years. There was tension in the air that could be heard in their talk about their menfolk.

This trip was different. Major Walter Laine, senior, was a “field officer” and for that reason the three living members of the family had a private room, something that might be called a “stateroom” by the generously minded.
Somewhere down in the hold was a three foot metal coffin that contained the fourth member of the family. That was an infant boy who had been conceived, born and died in Germany the previous year. He had perished of a heart defect beyond cure or hope.

Little Walter Laine enjoyed the trip immensely. He liked the ship. He liked the grey, wind-driven sea. He liked the food served in the ship’s mess facility where his parents ate with the merchant marine officers who ran the vessel as well as other officer passengers. He particularly liked the breakfasts served there. The messmen soon learned that the boy would eat all they put on his tray. He was careful to thank them for his food. He had been taught to be courteous, especially to those who might somehow think he was arrogant or haughty. Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage gravy on toast, stewed apples and biscuits; these were treasures to be consumed with relish. His mother did not like to cook and certainly not such food as this and so, this was a rare opportunity.

The son passed many of the hours between meals and bed-time reading books and magazines from the tiny ship’s library. Sitting on the “weather deck” of the old “tub” he clutched cheap editions to him against the spray and gusts. There, one day he first read Hemingway and a new world opened. This habit came to an end when his mother expressed concern about the books and their worth,

Half way across the Atlantic, a passing captain stopped to watch him play chess against another boy. The man asked to play the next game against Laine and seemed
satisfied with this pastime until he finally lost. After that he was absent from the part of
the deck where Laine played with his friends.

The boy knew that several bad things had happened to his family in Germany.
First and apparently most importantly the infant brother had died, tearing a wound in his
parents’ hearts. Secondly, there had been some dispute in his father’s work as a
financial officer. The boundaries of this difficulty were not clear to him but he
understood it to concern his father’s unwillingness to “bend” regulations to the taste of a
senior officer. Thirdly, his father had angered a general over an audit of the man’s unit
finances and this man wished him gone. As a result, they were going home.

That made young Laine sad. He liked Germany and the larger Europe beyond
the borders of the American Zone of Occupation. For an American child the occupation
of Germany had created an immense and fertile ground for learning, experience and
play. It was true that the ruined towns and parts of towns were frightening, but the
Germans were quickly recovering their ability to make and sell the things that children
love. Wooden toys, Christmas ornaments, carved and marvelously wrought art that
depicted their rich heritage of legend and myth; these were all things to delight a child’s
soul. The boy particularly remembered the carved altar in the Army chapel in which his
family worshipped. The building was a simple Quonset hut set in one of the many
German municipal woodland parks. The altar was mounted on a pivot at the center.
On one side in deep relief was a representation of “The Last Supper.” On the other
was a scene from the Old Testament to make the altar useful for Jewish services.
It snowed their first Christmas Eve in Germany. A choir of soldiers sang for midnight mass. The moon had emerged by the time mass ended. Brilliant moonlight made ice crystals in the snow glitter like tiny jewels. The crunch beneath their boots was wondrous.

In an unusual event a child had been baptized at mass that night.

His mother wept as they walked home. His father “shushed” her to whimpers telling her that she could cry when they were home but not in front of the Germans.

They lived in a large house “requisitioned” from the German owner. The house was in a street undamaged by Allied bombers. It had been left untouched because the planners for the post-war occupation had marked the neighborhood as one that would be needed for housing officials of the occupation

In a characteristically generous decision, his father decided to allow the owner to live in the housekeeper’s apartment on the top floor. The man could often be heard there playing the baby grand piano that he moved upstairs. He played well and was particularly fond of Gershwin’s work... Laine did not know who George Gershwin was but his father explained. For major occasions like Christmas the owner was invited downstairs to eat in his own kitchen with the household staff that the occupation government required Laine’s father to maintain. Employment was scarce in Germany.
There was a housekeeper, a professional “domestic,” who ran the affairs of the household with characteristic rigor. She was a middle aged woman who wore her grey hair in a “bun” and always seemed to be scowling.

There was a gardener.

There was a cook. She cooked wonderfully and was the housekeeper’s cousin.

There was a housemaid. She was a pretty thing, blond and nineteen years old.

There was a driver for his father’s staff car. The man’s name was Wilhelm Flieger. In the war he had been a captain in the Luftwaffe and had flown FW-190s against the Soviets and Western Allies.

He was in his forties and had been the owner of a major car sales dealership in Bremen before the war. He was the housemaid’s older brother. Flieger and the boy’s father got on well and young Walter often rode on the front seat between them. Flieger never talked about the war, but for Christmas that year he gave the boy a used copy of “Mission Beyond Darkness” suitably inscribed.
The boy’s mother hated Germans as well as the Japanese. She hated the household staff and usually hid from them in charity work or in parts of the big house that they knew she did not want to see them in.

There was a constant, annoying series of hostile events between Laine’s mother and the servants.

One involved a dog. At the father’s request Flieger brought a full grown German Shepherd. The father wanted it for a watch dog. The mother did not want a dog, especially a German dog. Its name was Ulrich.
Flieger said that it had been a guard dog on a German air base. He said the farmer who now owned it could not afford to feed it. This was probably a lie. It was probably the fighter pilot’s dog. The big dog was under-nourished. The boy and the dog looked at each other while the parents tried to find words with which to say that the dog frightened them. The boy sat down cross legged on the parquet floor near the beast. The animal approached and lay down with his head in the boy’s lap. It was decided that he could stay, at least for a while. The boy and the pilot took Ulrich to a slaughter house the next day where the dog drank most of a pail of blood and then licked Walter’s hand. The boy loved animals and they knew that,

On another occasion loud arguments could be heard from the kitchen. The Laines rose from supper in the dining room to learn the cause. Flieger and his sister were shouting at each other across the kitchen table. He was red in the face and she was weeping. It was learned that the girl had been seen by her brother going to the American military cinema with an American soldier. Her brother was enraged. The boy’s mother flew into a rage of her own, telling Flieger that he should be honored that an American liked his sister, considering… The Luftwaffe veteran absorbed that insult and then said “You must understand *Herr Major,* it is not because he is American. How would you feel if the situation were reversed?” His father told Flieger to deal with this himself but to make sure his behavior was impeccable. The former officer bowed slightly.
With all this as background it was not surprising that Walter’s mother flew into a
tirade against the former enemies of the United States once she reached her home on
that snowy Christmas morning.

His father tried to quiet her, afraid the staff would hear, but there was no ending
her anger.

She was particularly loud about the Japanese. “He should know what the
damned filthy Japs did to John McDonnell! He should know!”

“What should I know?” the boy asked. His dog, Ulrich, sat beside him. They
were almost the same height when the dog sat.

There was a pleasant blaze in the fireplace. It must have been set by one of the
staff. The flickering yellow light reflected on the dark paneling of the room.

His father switched on the big Grundig radio that sat on a table near the fireplace.
Bing Crosby was singing “White Christmas” on Armed Forces Radio. “The chaplain
who baptized you,” his father began, “Father John McDonnell was his name. He was a
close friend of ours. This was at Fort Devens. He was captured by the Japanese Army
on Bataan and died in captivity. There have been terrible rumors as to how he died
after the Death March… He was a close friend and spent Christmas with us once at
Devens when you were a baby. We should not speak of this on Christmas morning,
perhaps some other time.”

“What has this got to do with Flieger or the people we know here?” the boy
asked.
“Nothing! Not a damned thing! Go to bed. Take the dog with you. Now!”

As he lay in bed, his warrior dog warming his feet, he could still hear his mother wailing in the parlor.

Later that day they went to see Bob Hope’s Christmas show in a big theater used by the US Army for movies. Coming out of the building later, the boy saw Flieger’s sister in the crowd. She was with her soldier friend. She saw him and held a finger to her lips. He smiled at her in what he hoped was reassurance.

Standing on the quay in New York, he watched his father supervise the loading of the little casket into a hearse.

The Zebulon Pike carried him to a new stage in life. His childhood was ending.

The End